POLITICAL LEADERSHIP
Grappling with an Elusive Concept

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OVERVIEW

What is political leadership? A lack of leadership is often cited as the cause of the political ills of society, and strong leadership held up as the only way to solve our problems. This course aims to address the idea of political leadership from a number of perspectives. First, it will examine some perspectives on what political leadership means. Second, it will engage in an age-old debate by considering the relative impact of individual leaders on political outcomes versus the influence and constraints of a political context. Third, it will ask what it means for political leaders to be “great,” including reconsidering perceptions of winning and losing in political history. Fourth, it will examine some different types of leadership styles through character case studies. Fifth, it will consider political leadership through the lens of gender and race. Sixth, it will survey leadership in non-democratic contexts. Finally, it will conclude by asking what the potential impact of political leadership is today.

More broadly, the lectures, discussions, and readings will help us achieve a few course goals. First, we will gain an improved ability to understand what issues have been fundamental to political leadership over time. Second, we will compare arguments and theories offered by political thinkers in context, critically evaluating their arguments and why they may have put forward the ideas they championed. Third, we will place the ideas of political thinkers from the readings into the context of present-day current events in politics. Finally, as a more general goal for the course, I hope that we all can take a step forward toward becoming more politically critical, informed, and engaged citizens. Politics can be maddening, but it becomes more interesting and fun when you can make some sense of what is going on.

Our activities in class may take a number of formats. While we will often have lectures, depending on the topic there may also be discussions, debates, and/or small group work. Political concepts and topics often may reveal differences of opinion – this is particular true around election years! So even as some of us may have strong views and potentially disagree, I ask that we listen to each other’s viewpoints while working to ensure that civility and respect for each other are always present in our conversations.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Students are expected to complete the readings, come to lecture, and participate in class. Once during the semester, students will be expected to complete a short paper critically analyzing one or more weeks of readings. The paper should be 5 pages double-spaced. Another paper will be an

* In drafting this syllabus, I have partly drawn upon Stephen Skowronek’s “Political Leadership” syllabus at Yale (Spring 2018) and Vincent Moscardelli’s “American Political Leadership” syllabus at UConn (Spring 2013).
evaluation of the movie *The Dark Knight* based on a set of readings on leadership styles, which will be 7 pages. There will also be a final exam for the course. Alternatively, students may elect to do a research paper in place of the exam. Topics for this should be discussed with me and approved by Week 5. The grade breakdown is as follows:

- Participation – 15%
- Short Response Papers – 15%
- Movie Response Paper – 25%
- Final Assessment
  - Final Exam – 45%
  - Alternative Research Paper – 45%

**COURSE OUTLINE**

I. THE CONCEPT

**Week 1: What is Leadership?**

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1530)
Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” (1919)

II. INDIVIDUALS VERSUS CONTEXT

**Week 2: Individual Leadership**

James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, Ch. 1, 15
David R. Mayhew, *America’s Congress: Actions in the Public Sphere, James Madison Through Newt Gingrich* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), Ch. 1, 3
José D. Villalobos, Justin S. Vaughn, and Julia R. Azari, “Politics or Policy? How Rhetoric Matters to Presidential Leadership in Congress,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (September 2012): 549-576


**Week 3: Context**


Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), Ch. 2-3


**III. GREATNESS**

**Week 4: What is Greatness?**


Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis, *Presidential Greatness* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), Ch. 1

Abraham Lincoln, “Address to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield” (1838)


Alvin B. Tillery, Jr., and Hanes Walton, Jr., “Presidential greatness in the black press: ranking the modern presidents on civil rights policy and race relations, 1900–2016,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, forthcoming

**Week 5: Winning, Losing, and Greatness**


Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis, *Presidential Greatness* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), Ch. 7-8

Jeffrey K. Tulis and Nicole Mellow, *Legacies of Losing in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), Ch. 1, 5

**IV. SOME LEADERSHIP STYLES**
Week 6: Aristocratic

Week 7: Heroic
Bruce Miroff, *Icons of Democracy: American Leaders as Heroes, Aristocrats, Dissenters, and Democrats*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), Ch. 5, 8

Week 8: Democratic
David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), Introduction, Ch. 1

Week 9: Dissenting
Bruce Miroff, *Icons of Democracy: American Leaders as Heroes, Aristocrats, Dissenters, and Democrats*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), Ch. 4, 6, 9

**PAPER** – In the movie *The Dark Knight*, how what elements of these four leadership styles does Bruce Wayne / Batman display? How effective is he as a leader in Gotham? What should he have done differently?

V. GENDER AND RACE

Week 10: Gender


**Week 11: Race**


Ta-Nehisi Coates, “My President Was Black,” *Atlantic*, January/February 2017, [https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/my-president-was-black/508793/](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/my-president-was-black/508793/)

**VI. NON-DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP**

**Week 12: Authoritarianism**


**VII. THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP**

**Week 13: How Are Leaders Impacting Today’s Politics?**


**FINAL EXAM**
• Identifications – Choose 10 of 15 – 40%
• Long Essays – Choice two of three questions – 60%